

JOSE THE BUSBOY

1 The job began as a *pro bono* assignment, a favor for a lawyer who helped me getting
2 my appraisal practice started. The decedant, John, was an early victim of the AIDS
3 epidemic. He died in a one room Coconut Grove apartment cluttered with the accouterment
4 of disease — hospital bed, wheel chair, walker, oxygen tanks — and little else. Under
5 normal circumstances an appraisal would not have been necessary. What complicated his
6 estate was a will. In it he left his few possessions by categories to specific friends. His
7 clothes were parceled out according to their size, the meager jewelry by style, a glass
8 menagerie by animal and interest, utensils to the individuals who could benefit the most
9 from them, and furniture by need. The residual was to go to “Jose, the busboy at Monty
10 Trainor’s, who offered me comfort when I was particularly low.” The categories and
11 descriptions were vague enough that the lawyer didn’t want to make decisions over junk that
12 might lead to any time consuming controversy. That was to be the focus of my job.

13 The AIDS epidemic was still new, and no one was sure how the disease spread. A
14 cleanup crew — already at work in hazmat suits, gloves and masks — greeted me at the
15 door. The suit they offered to me was a relief. I parceled out John’s small items into labeled
16 cartons and tagged the furniture. The will was so detailed that there was not much left for
17 Jose’s carton. I didn’t expect that anybody would bother to pick their stuff up.

18 Before I completed my report the lawyer called again. More property was discovered
19 and I would have to repeat the process, this time at my regular rate at a bank branch in Bal
20 Harbor. John’s estranged mother died in the process of moving from Chicago to Miami
21 Beach. Her possessions were already in transit to what was to be her new apartment. The
22 new furniture had not yet been delivered. The stress of the move did her in, just days before
23 John died. The shipment, along with the contents of several safe deposit boxes, were

24 diverted to the bank in Bal Harbor. Nothing was labeled.

25 When I arrived at the bank the manager directed me to a wood paneled conference
26 room on the top floor overlooking some of Miami's most expensive real estate. John's
27 formerly faceless friends including Jose, now arranged around the conference table with the
28 lawyer, greeted me.

29 A parade of bank employees pushing cartons made their way up to the conference
30 room on my heels. One after another they placed each carton on the conference table.
31 Opening them became a group effort. The first boxes were women's clothing. When we got
32 to the designer eveningwear John's friends got into trying them on. Now dressed in
33 sequined gowns and feather boas, the atmosphere took a turn. A bottle of vodka appeared,
34 singing and dancing followed. It became clear that the estate would need a real appraisal. I
35 would have liked to join the party, but had to maintain my composure while photographing
36 and assigning values to everything. John's friends pretty much ignored how the original will
37 apportioned things, and the division of his mother's things was now being made on a good
38 humored ad hoc basis. They divvied up the clothes, jewelry, paintings, and antiques by
39 impulse with no regard to value. The chaotic scene continued for hours.

40 Lost in the commotion was any thought of Jose's remainder. John died in debt and
41 his will did not include any provision for distributing money. Focused on my job and trying
42 to avoid any distractions, I missed the lawyer trying to get my attention. When finally I
43 turned to him it was clear that he was getting into the spirit of the occasion, flushed with the
44 vodka and gaiety. He waved me over so much as to say take a break. When I was close
45 enough for him to talk, *sotto voce*, he tells me to look at Jose. "He doesn't know it yet, but
46 he got the old lady's millions."